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Welcome Back

My wife, Donna, and I were planning to spend a year in India in 1982. Due to unforeseen circumstances, we returned home in April of that year. In July of 1982 we moved from Oklahoma City to El Dorado, Arkansas, where I preached in area churches at East Faulkner in El Dorado, at Antioch in Louisiana, and occasionally at Urbana, Arkansas.

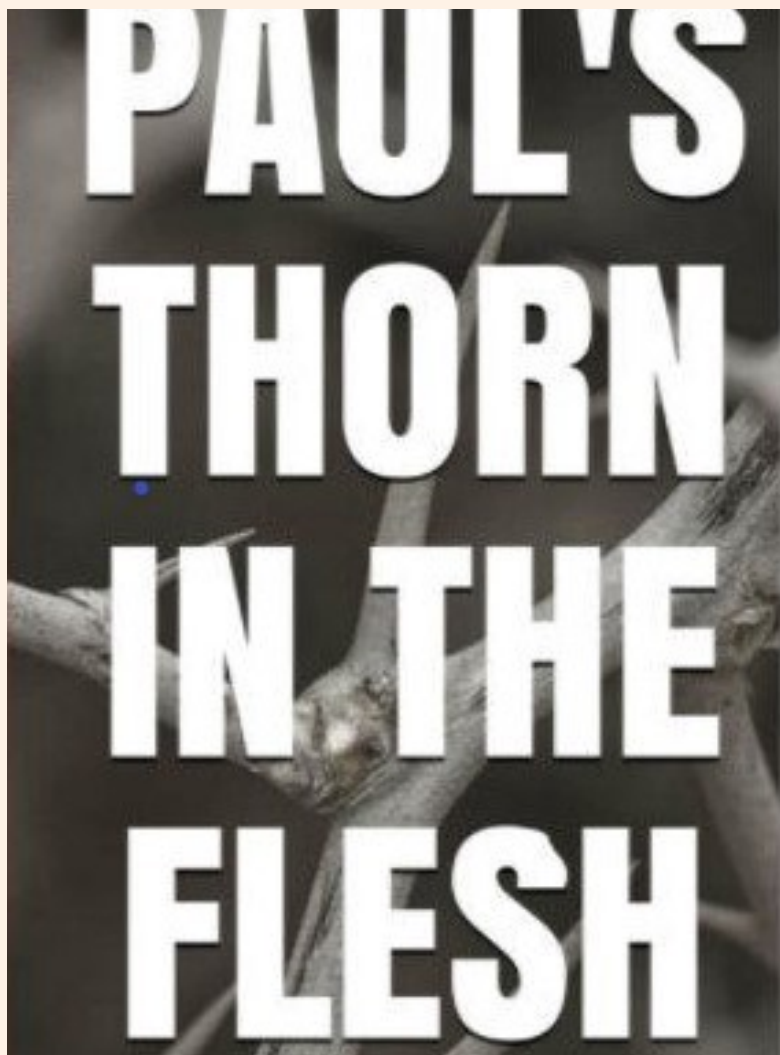
When I arrived in El Dorado, my father, the late Ralph D. Gage, along with Jim Bullock had begun publishing *Basic Christianity*. I began to help in writing articles and eventually assumed the role of editor.

In this issue we are happy to welcome Jim Bullock back as a contributing writer. Jim has worked in education over the years and has worked for colleges in Texas, West Virginia, and Arkansas. He grew up in El Dorado and his father, the late Joe Bullock, was an elder at the East Faulkner congregation. For a number of years Jim worked with the North 5th Church of Christ in West Monroe, Louisiana.

His most recent role in education was at South Arkansas College in El Dorado where he served as Vice President of Academic Affairs/Provost. He and his wife, Susie, are currently attending the East Faulkner Church of Christ, and Jim is serving in a leadership role and doing much of the teaching.

We are thankful to have Jim using his writing talents to assist *BC* as we continue encouraging the Lord's people around the world.

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Paul's Thorn in the Flesh

The apostle Paul mentions in 2 Corinthians 12 that he had been given a “thorn in the flesh.” The context of that chapter gives us some insight into what Paul was talking about, namely that the church in Corinth had been infiltrated with what Paul called “false apostles,” who had come in among them after the true apostles had moved on to establish other churches. These false apostles **boasted** of having superior lineage and spiritual authority and had sought to undermine the work and teachings of the true apostles that had established the church. Paul writes the 2 Corinthian letter in large measure to challenge and expose these false apostles and to remind the congregation of the true teachings of Jesus. So Paul begins 2 Corinthians 12, as he had begun chapter 11, with a kind of tongue-in-cheek rebuttal of the boastful lies of the false apostles, claiming that if anyone had a right to boast, he and his fellow apostles were the ones who could justify it.

2 Corinthians 12:1-7. “I must go on boasting. Although there is nothing to be gained, I will go on to visions and revelations from the Lord. ² I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven. Whether it was in the body or out of the body I do not know—God knows. ³ And I know that this man—whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, but God knows—⁴ was caught up to paradise and heard inexpressible things, things that no one is permitted to tell. ⁵ I will boast about a man like that, but **I will not boast about myself, except about my weaknesses.** ⁶ Even if I should choose to boast, I would not be a fool, because I would be speaking the truth. But I refrain, so no one will think more of me than is warranted by what I do or say, ⁷ or because of these surpassingly great revelations. Therefore, **in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me.**

Identifying the “Thorn in the Flesh”

The Bible doesn't say exactly what the malady was, just that it “tormented” Paul, as though it were a “messenger of Satan.” Other Scriptures, however, mention possibilities:

Gal. 4:13-15. “As you know, it was because of an illness that I first preached the gospel to you, ¹⁴ and even though my illness was a trial to you, you did not treat me with contempt or scorn. Instead, you welcomed me as if I were an angel of God, as if I were Christ Jesus himself. ¹⁵ Where, then, is your blessing of me now? I can testify that, if you could have done so, you would have torn out your eyes and given them to me.”

This passage suggests the possibility that Paul's problem had to do with his eyesight, echoing the fact that when Jesus first appeared to him, he was stricken blind. However, he regained his sight on that occasion, at least enough to continue his journey (**Acts 9:8, 18**).

A third passage also hints at the possibility of ongoing poor eyesight: **Gal. 6:11.** “See with what large letters I am writing to you with my own hand.” Many of Paul's letters were dictated to a “scribe,” who actually wrote them down for him. But Paul makes a point here, just two chapters after he had mentioned their willingness to “pluck out their own eyes” and give them to him, to say that he himself wrote their letter *with his own hand*, suggesting the possibility again that he may have struggled with poor eyesight.

The Bible's silence on the matter of identifying the exact physical illness from which Paul suffered in and of itself implies that the point of his teaching is not the precise cause of his suffering, but rather the fact that he suffered—and overcame it. And he knew that we all suffer from our own “thorns in the flesh” and shared his story to help us overcome them.

In fact, prior to the previous passage from **2 Cor. 12**, Paul mentions in **2 Cor. 11:21-30** the many obstacles he had faced in his ministry; yet he considers them all to be more a source of his strength than a reason to be discouraged:

“Whatever anyone else dares to boast about—I am speaking as a fool—I also dare to boast about. ²² Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they Abraham's descend-

ants? So am I. ²³ Are they servants of Christ? (I am out of my mind to talk like this.) I am more. I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. ²⁴ Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. ²⁵ Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, ²⁶ I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers. ²⁷ I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. ²⁸ Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. ²⁹ Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn? ³⁰ If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness.”

Rather than asking the specific identity of what Paul called his “thorn in the flesh,” perhaps it would be more useful for us to ask, “What was the purpose God intended for it to achieve in Paul’s life?” The answer to that question Paul himself gives in **2 Cor. 12:8-10**: ⁸ “Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take [the “thorn in the flesh”] away from me. ⁹ But he said to me, ‘My *grace* is sufficient for you, *for my power is made perfect in weakness*.’ Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. ¹⁰ That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.”

Few of us would want to exchange our problems for Paul’s, let alone Christ’s. We tend to think that if God loved us, He would erase all difficulties from our lives, overlooking the example that Paul and the great men and women of faith have set before us: “When I am weak, then I am strong.” God’s strength, His purpose, and His reward are

simply greater than the worst this world might throw at us, and it’s that fact that gives us the strength to navigate our lives.

Paul mentioned a host of struggles, in addition to his thorn in the flesh, concluding with the message that the Lord gave him: “My grace is sufficient for you.” This critical understanding of life in Christ is essential to our ability to endure these struggles. The Scriptures are full of passages that teach this truth. We’ll look at several verses that address the exact kinds of life challenges and their remedies that Paul enumerated in 2 Cor. 12:10:

Weaknesses

Matthew 11:28 – “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.”

Hebrews 4:15 – “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin.”

Philippians 4:13 – “I can do all this through him who gives me strength.”

Psalms 73:26 – “My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.” It’s all about our perspective: it’s not about *our strength*, but *the Lord’s*.

Insults

1 Peter 3:9 – “Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult. On the contrary, repay evil with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing.”

Luke 6:28 – “Bless those who curse you. Pray for those who mistreat you.” Remember our Savior on the cross, who said, “Father, forgive them. They know not what they do” (**Luke 23:34**).

James 1:19 – “Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry.”

Hardships

Psalms 46:1 – “God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble.”

Romans 15:13 – “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.”

Persecutions

Matthew 5:10–12 – “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so persecuted they the prophets who were before you.”

John 15:18–20 – “If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. Remember the word that I said to you: ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you.”

Philippians 1:29 – “For it has been *granted* to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake.”

1 Peter 3:14–17 – “But even if you should suffer for doing good, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God’s will, than for doing evil.”

Difficulties

James 1:2–4 – “² Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, ³ because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. ⁴ Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.”

Hebrews 12:11 – “No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but later on it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace.”

In conclusion consider this passage, Romans 8:28–39:

“²⁸ And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.... ³¹ What, then, shall we say in response to these things? *If God is for us, who can be against us?* ³² He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? ³³ Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. ³⁴ Who then is the one who condemns? No one. Christ Jesus who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. ³⁵ Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? ... ³⁸ For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, ³⁹ neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Jim Bullock

El Dorado, AR

Devotion to Burdens

Itsuo Abe has been busted. The 59-year-old was placed in custody in Kyoto, Japan recently when police found 21 statues of Buddha in his home, all of them stolen. One of those images was of particular interest, a 400-year-old object of veneration from the 17th century. A Zen temple founded in 1202 had reported this image missing. Other temples in the area had reported their Buddha statues missing as well.

Arranged in front of his illegal collection of statues were apples and bananas. Abe confessed to taking the objects, but insisted it was part of his religious rituals. "I took it home and prayed to it every day," Reuters News Service reported him saying.

The objects of Abe's devotion have turned out to be his undoing. But is he the only one guilty of such a critical mistake?

The story of King Midas comes to mind. Midas, according to the Greek myth, showed kindness to the satyr Silenus. Silenus offered to grant whatever wish Midas might have as thanks for his kindness. Midas asked that whatever he might touch be turned to gold. The gold to which the king was devoted became a burden, however, when food and drink became unusable in his hands. In Nathaniel Hawthorne's retelling of the story, his daughter became a lifeless statue because of his accursed touch.

The prophet Isaiah spoke of the futility of any idol. "They bear it on the shoulder, they carry it and set it in its place, and it stands; from its place it shall not move. Though one cries out to it, yet it cannot answer nor save him out of his trouble" (Isaiah 46:7). Itsuo Abe would have to agree that none of the statues to which he prayed have been able to deliver him from his legal mess.

The only true and living God extended a gracious invitation later in Isaiah's book: "Ho! Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy, and eat. Yes, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend money for what is not bread, and your wages for what does not satisfy? Listen carefully to Me, and eat what is good, and let your soul delight itself in abundance" (Isaiah 55:1,2).

Life is filled with attractive pursuits. Some promise pleasure, others assure us they'll give power or wealth or fame. Our first devotion, however, should always be to God. Of all the objects we might desire, only He has the ability to bear us through life's toughest moments.

After discussing the everyday needs of life (food, clothing, etc.), Jesus stated the key to successful living: "But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you" (Matthew 6:33).

Those things to which you're devoted: Are they really helping you, or have they proved to be more of a burden? Turn to Christ. He offers to help all who labor and are heavy laden (Matthew 11:28-30).

Timothy D. Hall
LightGrams March 5, 2009



God's Remedy for a Weary Mind

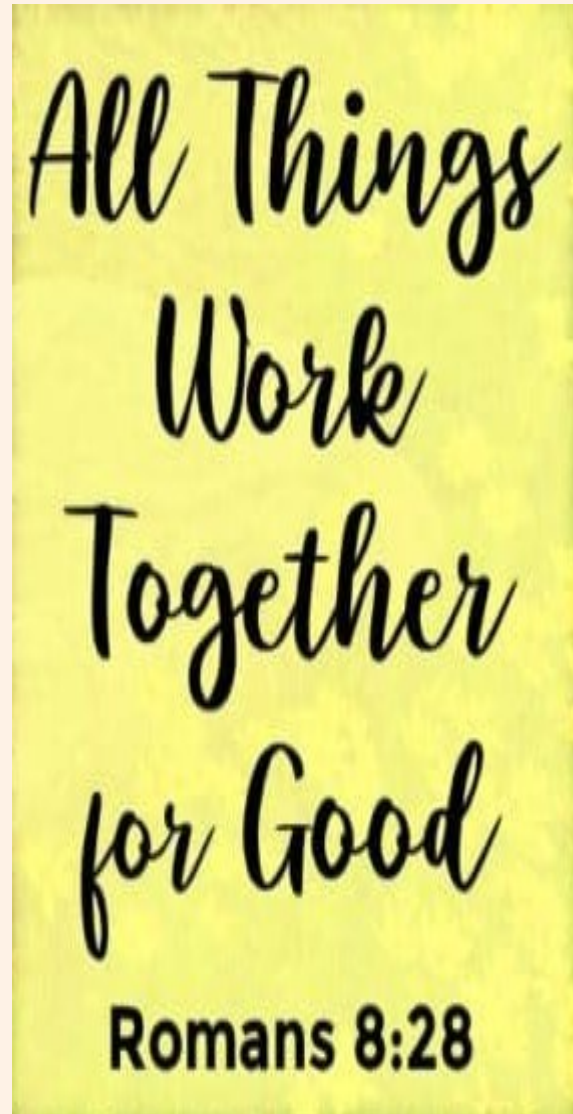
Do you ever feel stuck in a rut? You find yourself frustrated, anxious, or overwhelmed. Your mind starts spiraling through all the negative things happening in your life — despite working hard, you're not seeing the results you'd hoped for. You've been praying for a loved one, but it feels like nothing has changed. Money is tight, work is stressful, and caring for your children or aging parents has become exhausting. The list goes on... and dwelling on these struggles can quickly lead to feelings of despair, hopelessness, or even depression.

That's why Philippians 4:8 encourages us to shift our focus: to think about whatever is true, honorable, just, pure, lovely, commendable, excellent, and worthy of praise. These thoughts not only bring glory to God, but they also protect our mental health. God knows our human nature — He understands that if we constantly fixate on hardship, it can paralyze us mentally, physically, and spiritually.

So He lovingly commands us to focus on the good, the beautiful, and the worthwhile. He calls us to practice what we've learned, received, and heard. Why? Because, as Philippians 4:9 reminds us, when we do these things, "the God of peace will be with you." And earlier in verse 7, we're promised that His peace — the kind that surpasses all understanding — will guard our hearts and minds.

Michelle Franklin

Rogers, AR





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Email: Lsgage129@cs.com

www.basicchristianity.net